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AUTHOR Blake, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

Nonnative English speaking college students often find themselves in a remedial course along with native speakers of English who are there on the basis of their high school performance. To determine how well the nonnative student can write, the English teacher could give a two-part diagnostic test. The first part of the test would assess the student's ability to rewrite sentences, correct errors, and combine sentences. The second part would be a classroom writing assignment. The teacher could then analyze the paper and discuss with the student what he or she needs to do to be a better writer. This discussion could be enhanced by a "student writing analysis sheet" that would arrange comments according to rhetorical task, relation of parts to whole, sentence structure, word choice, and mechanics. A writing program, based on the student's needs, could then be established that would (1) provide a natural sequence of writing activities, (2) require complete pieces of discourse, (3) provide interaction with classmates as the student goes through the composing process, (4) provide feedback on writing drafts through teacher conferences, (5) require completion of extensive and frequent sentence combining activities, and (6) provide many English mechanics exercises. (HOD)

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Starting Off a Student Whose Native Language Is Not English in a College Basic Skills Communication Course

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Robert W. Blake
English Education
Department of Curriculum
and Instruction
SUNY College at Brockport
Brockport, NY 14420

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Starting Off a Student Whose Native Language is Not English
in a College Basic Skills Communication Course

On the first day of Communication Skills 102, Francisco--not his real name--sits in the second row smiling at me and at everybody around him. He is slender, and when he stands up at the end of class, I see he is tall, close to six feet. He has curly brown hair, brown eyes, and a wispy mustache. I find out later that he had come to New York City a few years earlier from the Dominican Republic; he tells me this in a later narrative: "I came alone from Santo Domingo, where there is no winter; but warm sunshine weather. Like California, Santo Domingo was a day spent on the beach, relaxing and enjoying." For the last four years he has lived on FDR Drive along the East River in Manhattan, taking classes--again, as I learn later--in both Spanish and English. This is his first class in which the instruction is entirely in English. But here he is now at a small, upstate New York college in a climate and educational environment about as far removed from Santo Domingo weather and culture as he can get and still remain on earth. So this bright September day, Francisco sits, smiling, obviously eager to learn how to write English in this gringo classroom.

The communication skills course Francisco finds himself in is a remedial course for those students--on the basis of past performance in high school--who have been identified as not being ready to enter the first of the two regular college communication skills courses which all students must successfully complete before moving on to further collegiate work. Most of the twenty-five students in the class are native speakers of English. There is, however, another remedial course in communication skills each semester, Communication Skills 101, usually with two sections for all students whose native language is something other than English, but

frequently several of these foreign students overflow the two classes and the immigrants are placed in "regular" basic classes with instructors reputed to know something about teaching them how to write.

So how can I help Francisco--and two other Hispanics and one Egyptian as well--to write academic English? Should I be fluent in Spanish? It would be nice, I suppose, but I don't have any Spanish. I do, however, know some French and German and did live in Germany for a year-and-a-half during which time I travelled throughout Europe, making a strenuous attempt to assimilate the languages and cultures of people far different from me. Should I have special training in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages? (TESOL is the acronym for this mouthful.) I don't, but I have taught writing at all school and college levels and have a fairly extensive knowledge of linguistics, including the grammar and phonology of English as well as the most basic notions from psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Most importantly, though, I consider myself sympathetic to the problems non-native speakers of English may have in learning how to write academic English. I go on at this length about my personal background because, contrary to what the vociferous advocates of bilingual education and TESOL hold, most English teachers in regular classrooms will find, possibly to their surprise, that their special professional training and experience have prepared them quite well to teach these new immigrants to America--be they from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Viet Nam, Japan, or from Egypt--how to become competent writers.

Given the present situation in the classroom and my particular training and experience, what's my first step in helping Francisco learn how to write English well enough to go on to the regular communication skills course? First, I must find out at this point simply how well he can write. In

order to do this, I give him a two-part diagnostic test. Section A of Part II has ten sentences with common usage and basic punctuation errors. The students, in spaces provided on the test, are directed to re-write the sentences, correcting the errors as they go along. Section B contains ten common words and phrases, such as "your," "there" or "it's," with directions to "write a sentence in which you use the word or phrase correctly." Section C addresses the skill of "combining groups of sentences by means of coordination and using proper indicators of coordination" by giving the students ten sets of simple sentences to combine. The last Section D of Part II deals with the skill of "combining sentences by means of subordination," directing the students to combine by subordination ten sets of simple sentences.

The second part of the diagnostic competency test--which is my chief concern within the scope of this paper--is a classroom writing assignment, leading to a piece of whole discourse and designed to insure that "all students who intend to continue their studies at the college can complete several tasks which demonstrate knowledge and control of the writing process and the conventions of formal, written English."

In the written directions of the diagnostic essay, the students are told: "You will demonstrate competency in Part I if you can write a paragraph that (1) follows the directions carefully, (2) contains relevant examples, (3) has very few errors in spelling and punctuation, (4) includes appropriately developed sentences with clear transitions." Pretty hard reading for Francisco, I realize, but I read the directions out loud to the class--very slowly and distinctly--and answer all questions before he and the others proceed.

This is the writing assignment the students are given to complete in class within a full period. In devising the assignment, we wanted to make it specific and realistic with a clear description of the rhetorical elements of purpose, audience, and writer's role or persona the students must attend to:

> Directions: You have been asked to fill out a recommendation for a friend who has applied for a job as a clerk in a bank. One section of the form has these directions.
>
> **Describe the way the applicant behaves when he/she** is corrected, disagreed with, and/or given rather demanding instructions. Be sure to give specific examples of the behavior you describe.
>
> Write a one-paragraph entry of approximately 200 words. Be sure to include specific examples. Remember also that your skill in writing may have an effect on your friend's future employment.

This is what Francisco wrote in response to the assignment.

To Whom May Concerns:

The first thing that would like to write in these recomanendation foorm is. I know José Callado for a very long time. He is a exellent asset ~~of~~ Of the community, friends, and his family. I think that there are not a easy Way ~~of~~ to describe the behaves of my friend José Callado when he is correctod by his friends ~~of~~ or by any other person. Is it very inusual to human being acept the correction by other person but José Callado do the opposity that We the human being does. He acept the correction. ~~And too he like to follood the opion~~ when he is doing something Wrong. Let me give a example of haw José act when ~~somone~~ he had being correcteds by ~~[redacted]~~. someone. ~~We Were working~~ Five month ago We were Working together in Tlaum town grocery Store. One day he was putting Soda in the in the refrigerator, MR. Luis Vallejo. the owner of the grocery came. Came and say to him "You are doing something Wrong." Jose stop and says to me MR. Vallejo "What are doing Wrong?"

Mr. Vallejo say. "I Wont tell you. Then Jose say if you don't correct me I will no continuerrrr punting soda en. finally Mr. Luis says you has to put soda in straight line, more organize" The end was that Jose follow the correction by Mr. Vallejo and after that he was ~~one of~~ the only person in the store who caribal ~~to organize~~ organize the Refigeration better than Mr. Vallejo. Finally I strongly believe that if you hire Jose Collado he will be one more asset to yours bank.

Very truly yours,

The next step is to analyze Francisco's paper and talk with him about what he needs to work on to become a better writer. Using a simple "Student Writing Analysis Sheet," I write comments in these categories: I. Rhetorical Task, II. Relation of Parts to Whole, III. Sentence Structure, IV. Word Choice, and V. Mechanics. Here's Francisco's "Student Writing Analysis Sheet."

Starting Off a Student Student Writing Analysis Sheet 7

Student Francisco

Assignment Recommendation for Bank Clerk's Job Date

Category	Analysis	Recommendations
I. Rhetorical Task (understand directions, recognize rhetorical aim, use conventions of mode, consistent point of view, sense of audience)	You understand the directions well. You know your audience, and you keep your point of view consistent.	Good work. Keep it up!
II. Relation of Parts to Whole (organization or sequencing; generalizations supported by reasons, details, examples; appropriate level of generalization; coherence)	You have a clear sense of structure. Good use of examples. Dialogue makes the paper immediate. Good use of transitions. Good balance between specifics and general statement.	Again, good work. Keep it up.
III. Sentence Structure (varied sentence structures, free of sentence errors, neither short and choppy nor long and stringy sentences)	Major problems with English sentences. Problems with verbs.	Need concentrated and continuing work with "English" sentences, correct verb forms.
IV. Word Choice (clear, concrete rather than vague language; words used accurately; single words used for longer structures; mixture of levels, unconscious word repetition)	Pretty good use of English words but need to widen your English vocabulary.	Work needed on precise English words and on expanding your English vocabulary.
V. Mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, handwriting, format)	Problems with spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and handwriting.	Need drill on mechanics of written English. Practice in proofreading.

So what can I say about Francisco's writing? It is of utmost importance that I am able to move past his serious problems with English sentences, diction, and mechanics to note two really significant aspects of his writing. First, from this piece, there is no doubt that he understands well the rhetorical task he has been assigned--the purpose of his discourse. He also assesses correctly the audience for whom he is writing and assumes a writer's role (persona) appropriate to convey his message to this particular audience. I'm impressed by his ability to handle maturely these crucial aspects of effective writing. Second, he has a good sense of the structure of the piece; the paper has a definite beginning, middle, and ending. He balances generalizations with specific examples and also uses dialogue--albeit not always punctuated correctly--to enhance the piece. And he employs naturally and effectively transitional devices such as "first," "let me give you an example," and "finally." In several significant ways, he is an accomplished writer.

Now to Francisco's difficulties. I can see quite clearly that he has serious problems with written English sentences, but that is no surprise since he has been writing English, especially academic English, for only a few years. The way he puts his sentences together is simply not "English." This lack of the "feel" for how English sentences "go" is most evident in his inability to control the English verb system. "I know José Callado for very long time." "The owner of the store came and say to him . . . ." "José stop and says to me . . . ." "Mr. Vallejo say . . . ." He really doesn't have much trouble with diction--the precise use of words--but the problems he does have appear to stem from his lack of experience with English vocabulary. And finally, he has trouble with spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and even handwriting simply because he has not been

writing academic English very long. But even his spellings show a good phonetic sense of the sounds of the words. To his credit, he certainly is not afraid to use the words even though he's not completely sure of their spellings. I have no doubt he will become a better speller of English words as he writes a lot, learns how to proofread more carefully--with dictionary in hand--and learns some of the regularities and vagaries of English spelling.

Now that I have looked carefully at Francisco's writing, and talked to him about it, what do we do next? It is not within the scope of this paper to describe in detail the writing assignments, sentence combining activities, exercises in the mechanics of written English, and workshopping activities I planned for Francisco, but I can describe the general features of Francisco's program in the basic Communication Skills course.

1. The writing program for Francisco will be built upon my understanding of where he is at the beginning of the class. I have available a piece of his writing and can see that in a mature and confident way he is able to handle key elements in academic writing. I can also see just as clearly that he has serious problems with "English" sentences. I realize, furthermore, that he is a "stranger in a strange land" who needs all the personal support and encouragement he can get, even more than native speakers of English deserve.

2. Francisco's writing program will be based upon what I consider a natural sequence of writing activities. He will move from writing autobiography (an early memory) and biography (a "phase" biography of a close friend or relative) to several types of traditional exposition (use of examples and illustrations, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and a "how to" or process essay). For me, such a sequence is logical for two

reasons. First, with the initial narratives, Francisco will gain confidence in his writing ability by writing about events and people he knows well. Second, he will write narrative first--in which he can follow a natural, chronological structure--before he tackles exposition--in which he must create his own arbitrary and artificial structures. (See James Moffett's justification of this kind of scheme, especially in the chapter, "Kinds and Orders of Discourse," in his book Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

3. For all writing assignments, Francisco will create complete pieces of discourse. Although he will do exercises in usage, sentence combining, and the mechanics of written English--to complement his writing of whole narratives and essays--he will not be taught to believe that such drill in mechanics is in fact writing. I can't emphasize this point strongly enough. Many English teachers, many of my colleagues included, believe that a program for students deficient in writing skills should include heavy doses of drill and workbook exercises, gradually leading to writing single sentences and, possibly toward the end of a course, short paragraphs. No instructional plan could be worse for any would-be writer, and it's especially harmful for a so-called "basic" writer like Francisco. Francisco will become a competent writer--not by filling in blanks, crossing out incorrect usage items, underlining subjects once and predicates twice, and by putting together banal paragraphs--but by actually producing complete pieces of writing for specific audiences.

4. While creating these whole pieces of discourse, Francisco will, time after time, cycle through the composing process. He will interact with his classmates and me in one-to-one conferences, in small groups, and with members of the entire class as a whole during the prewriting,

the revising, and editing stages of composing. During the drafting stage, of course, he must work alone, and he needs to come to terms with the idea that although the drafting stage is a frightening and solitary one, it is nevertheless a necessary one for composing. He needs to go through the process enough times so he can learn to profit from the feedback others can give him about his writing and so he will not be a stranger to this process when he tackles any writing task.

5. Francisco and I will talk about his writing at every stage, from early drafts to finished products, sometimes for a few minutes but periodically for much longer times. Although he gets feedback about his writing from others, it is essential that he hear from me, a more experienced, especially trained teacher of writing, in specific terms, what is admirable in his writing but in just as specific terms how he can continue to improve. Short, oral conferences with Francisco are far more useful than extensive red marks on his papers--without a personal conference--would be.

6. Francisco will complete extensive and frequent sentence combining activities, discuss them with his classmates, take quizzes on the activities, and attempt to use the new structures in his compositions. Such activities will help him become aware of the range of English sentences available to him.

7. Francisco will do many exercises on the mechanics of English--standard usage, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and on other miscellaneous problems of written academic format--discuss them with his classmates, take quizzes on these matters, and, I trust, learn to handle correctly items from these categories in his papers. Although he and his

classmates will be taught to be scrupulous in proofreading their compositions for mechanical errors, they will also benefit from short but frequent drills on such matters.

Essentially, Francisco's program for learning how to write academic English will involve as much writing and pointed, direct discussion of his writing with me and with his classmates as we can manage within a semester. I want him to feel confident about the process of writing a whole piece of discourse and perhaps even somewhat more comfortable than he had been before with these exotic English sentences.

I have found out where Francisco is in the development of his ability to write academic English. He and I have a fairly accurate idea of what his strengths and weaknesses are. I have set up a comprehensive program, based upon my background and experience and the best information available, for helping him to improve his writing.

Now for both of us the hard work begins.